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ABSTRACT

The ideal linguistics course for undergraduates planning to teach a foreign language is one taught by a specialist thoroughly familiar with the linguistic problems of the language in question. The specialist should also be aware of the comparative problems of the student's native language. American students expecting to teach a foreign language should be intensely involved in discovering the linguistic problems of English as compared to the linguistic problems of the language they are to teach. If a student's study time is limited, he should be able to take those courses which would be most useful to him in his future job. (Author/VM)

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Linguistics Courses in Teachers' Colleges

One of the most delicate problems facing many American college language departments in the 1970's is or will be the introduction of linguistics courses into the curriculum. The problem is delicate, because there are many ways of studying linguistics, yet American colleges should be interested in promoting the study of those aspects of linguistics which will best meet the desires and needs of the students. These interests and needs can differ according to whether the schools in question give educational degrees or exclusively Bachelor of Arts degrees. It is possible that some kind of linguistics course might satisfy both types of students. Most schools, however, have limits of some kind on the number of courses they can offer. The problem then becomes: What kind of linguistics course will be offered ?

It would appear reasonable that B.A. students could take a course emphasizing the more general questions which a study of linguistics entails. Students preparing to teach French, German, Spanish or any other language upon graduation, however, have certain needs which cannot be put off, if they are to receive professional training.[1] In very practical terms, an American student expecting to teach French should be very intensely involved in discovering the linguistic problems of English as compared to French. The form and structure of the French language are so different from English that understanding the differences thoroughly could easily take more than one semester. Since usually only one semester of linguistic study is all many undergraduates can squeeze into their program after their conversation and composition courses, it seems obvious that they should study that which would help them most in their future job. If students wish to pursue linguistic study further than that, most small language departments do not have the extra personnel, nor do they have enough language students to make it feasible.

When the differences between French, German, English and Spanish are considered, it should be obvious that the linguistic problems in learning one language are not the same as in another. To begin with, the point of departure is crucial. An English-speaking person has different problems in learning French or Spanish than a German. The same would be true of a Frenchman learning Spanish or German: his problems change enormously. For students who are planning to teach beginning French, German or Spanish, etc., upon graduation, these problems are of prime importance. It would appear reasonable that, whenever possible, the complexity of this problem be respected and solutions adopted accordingly.

The polemical part of this discussion concerns the "catch-all" sort of linguistics course, which pretends to introduce the undergraduate to "Linguistics"

1) The reader will forgive this writer, hopefully, for not discussing Spanish, Russian, Chinese, Hebrew etc. My discussion can easily be generalized. I believe to illustrate the problems of Linguistics courses in any combination of languages.

for foreign language by discussing French, German, Spanish and perhaps English all in the same course. Such a course appears condemned to remain superficial, because an American student of French probably doesn't know more than three words of German or Spanish. If the professor distributes his time equally between the languages, the student of French will see two thirds of his time "wasted."

Much of the time spent tinkering with German or Spanish could be more profitably engaged in obtaining a deeper knowledge of English/French linguistic problems. This is an enormously complex subject. Treating it lightly can only give light results. Let us get into a more detailed description of the differences between French and German, in order to demonstrate the preceding opinion. It would then follow that a linguistics course pertinent to English/French must be devised differently from one that is pertinent to English/German or English/Spanish.

"Progressive"French and"Reactionary"German

The words "progressive" and "reactionary" are purely descriptive as applied to No value judgment is intended. French and German. The French rhythmic group has an accent on the last syllable, whereas German can have it on the first or in the middle. German in this respect is similar to English.

The grammar of French is such that the subject generally comes first, the verb second, adverbs and/or complements to the verb third. This order being fairly constant, the meaning of a French sentence is obtained by scanning left to right. German is not so consistent.

An example of the "reactionary" or "backward-looking" aspect of German is the subordinate clause. The subject will figure at the beginning of the clause, but the verb is placed at the end. This causes the listener or reader to wait until the end of the sentence before deciding how the preceding words will be understood. The German listener/reader must constantly "think" backward, in order to understand even moderately complex sentences.

This fundamental difference between French and German is a very good reason why linguistic students need not spend too much time understanding the word order characteristics of French. But this difference does explain why an American studying German should spend much more time on the word order problematic of German. It is a fundamental aspect of the language which can cause confusion for Americans. Witness the efforts of second year German students who have grasped the notion that the language is "reactionary", but haven't learned to recognize what kinds of words are put last in the sentence. Their extemporaneous efforts to converse in German often resemble a serious/ridiculous game of pig latin than spoken German.

Phonological Differences

Let us now take up a comparison of phonetic principles which explain "grammatical" differences between French and German. The differences begin with the syllable. French syllables follow a general rule of starting with consonants and ending with vowels wherever possible. German, on the contrary, tends to begin and end its syllables with a hard emphasis on beginning and end. The result is a much greater accumulation of consonants at the beginning and end of the German syllable. (pp51 & 64, Phonologie de l'Allemand, Marthe Philipp, Presses Univ. de France, 1970)

These beginning phonological differences become all important when the syllables are put into rhythmic groups. The French "word" as it is listed in dictionaries disappears in conversational use, due to the grouping of French syllables into grammatical *units*. These word *units* have one strong accent on the last syllable, and they cannot be broken up in prononnciation without straining comprehension. The syllables fit into this system thanks to the emphasis on the vowel purity. Dipthongues are rare in French.

German, on the other hand, does not necessarily put its accent on the last syllable of a rhythmic, grammatical *unit* (such as a prepositional phrase). The place of the accent of word *units* is more dependent on which syllable in the individual word contains the leading meaning(pp.15,16,126, Phonologie de l'Allemand, etc.), or whether the word is old or new in German usage(p.89, Eléments de Linguistique Générale, Martinet, Ed. Armand Colin, 1963). The lesser syllables have grammatical functions which often refer back to the beginning of the word group or even of the sentence. Example: ▷ = word group accent ← = grammatical dependence

Er hatte es dem grossen Hauptmann gesagt, obwohl er der Sache nicht ganz sicher war.

German therefore follows a different phonological principle from French, and a thorough knowledge of where to put the accent in a German grammatical word unit is a whole study in itself! (pp. 85-90, Martinet, etc.) How can a future German teacher afford to fool around with French and Spanish, etc., when he hardly knows how to explain the practical linguistic differences between English and German ?

The seriousness of this consideration is illustrated by the fact that this paper hasn't even discussed the differences in vocabulary between English, French and German. These differences are morphological, based in the history of the written ~~German~~ Languages, as well as semantic. Contrary to the popular misconception fostered by "translating machines," the meanings of words in one language do not translate 100 % into another language. It only takes the most elementary comparative study of German, French and English poetry to demonstrate the uniqueness of each language(cf. p.90, Martinet, ibid)

The preceding observation is borne out by comparing the vocabulary of French to that of English and German. Many French words have similar sounds but different spellings and contexts. Only a thorough familiarity with the phonological principles of French and the dependent semantic problems permit a student to operate in this linguistic system comfortably. English and German, on the other hand, have more words than French. Distinguishing what the words mean does not depend so much upon phonetic/semantic familiarity. The problem for an American learning German is much less phonetic and concerns more word derivation and composition, the correct grammatical endings of words, and word order in the sentence. It is "crashing through an open door" to say that a college language student is probably not "ready" to play around with "general linguistics," if he is not thoroughly acquainted with the comparative linguistic problems of the language he speaks and the one he wants to teach.

My conclusion about linguistics courses for undergraduates planning to teach a foreign language is that, whenever possible, a specialist thoroughly familiar with the linguistic problems of the language in question be selected to teach the linguistics course for that language. The specialist should also be thoroughly familiar with the comparative problems of the students' native language as well. When one is lacking, a course grouping students of all languages could be organized, but that is of necessity the least satisfactory solution. One might call such a conglomerate course a small fraud, designed to fit the state board of education's guidelines. For the student, however, such a course(on three foreign languages) is a two-thirds cheat, whether he knows it or not. Finally, a language department should naturally try to make use of the human resources it has. If a specialist is available for only one of two or three languages, he should be used for his specialty. At least the students in that language will not be cheated; the students left in the general course will then presumably have less need to waste their time on one of the languages they don't know. Everyone gains, except possibly the ratio of students per teacher. This administrative point calls for a last comment.

Colleges are increasingly hiring administrators whose business acumen is high, but whose cultural background is correspondingly low. Such electronic-age persons treat nebulous things like the fine arts and language as either sacred cows, or as unproductive luxuries. The reduction of teacher "worth" to teacher load(students per teacher) ignores the intangible worth of culture. It can't be weighed or rated in dollars and cents. But many bureaucrats are undoubtedly persuaded that a language course is no different from a science course or a history lecture. They ignore that a language carries history with it and is worth poten-

tially double: it opens up other history as well as one's own. In spite of this, the unconcern of administrators and the general public for the true worth of language studies probably explains why language studies are suffering for students and are being cut throughout the United States.

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